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Schoolscapes
The Newsletter

The Québec Education Program: Where We Are Now

This article is part of a three-part overview of proposed changes to the Québec Education Program. The other parts of the overview will appear in the next issue of Schoolscapes, The Newsletter.

Changes to the Program of Programs

By Wendy Mill

Easier to Use

Nicole Gagnon, the coordinator of the Program of Programs, explained that certain changes are being made in the organization of this part of the *Québec Education Program*. One purpose of the changes is to make it easier for teachers and cycle teams to use the Program of Programs in a systematic way. Another has to do with trends such as globalization, the increasing complexity of human relations and the emergence of a knowledge-based society. "I am pleased that we correctly understood the need to prepare students to play an active role in that complex world." The changes that are being made will reinforce the Program of Program's ability to prepare students to learn to learn and to develop high-order intellectual processes. For, contrary to what some people say, the QEP has high standards: "This is no bargain-basement program; this is an elite program—for everyone."

First of all, the presentation of each cross-curricular competency will be modified. Following the Statement of the Competency, each competency will be organized in terms of four categories:

- **Expectations Related to the Competency**, a category that already existed, will offer explanations and suggest more explicit links between the competency, the areas of lifelong learning and the subjects than in the previous version.
- **Key Features of the Competency**, a category that also existed in the previous version. These are short sentences that describe a step or procedure.
- **Development of the Competency**, a new category[1]
- **Benchmarks**; this category is still under discussion. If retained, it will replace Evaluation Criteria and in some cases, modify its content.

[1] The present translation of terms for proposed changes to the QEP is provided for information purposes only.

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Descriptive Scales

By Claudine St-Germain

In the next few months, school staff will begin using a new evaluation tool: descriptive scales. To help them become familiar with this mode of evaluation, Pierrette Jalbert, of Société GRICS and Michel Laurier, a Université de Montréal professor, explained their principles and use.

"The aim of a descriptive scale is to describe the course of development of a competency through all the cycles of elementary and secondary school for subject-specific competencies in terms of expectations, and for cross-curricular competencies," explained Pierrette Jalbert.

Teachers can use the scales to see where their students are in the evolution of their learning and share the responsibility to help them progress. Descriptive scales also enable parents and students to become aware of the levels in the development of a competency and the end-of-cycle expectations for the subject-specific competencies.

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Some Examples

To illustrate the new format, Gagnon presented a detailed description of the structure of an intellectual competency, *To use information*, and a personal and social competency, *To work with others*.

To use information:
The Expectations Related to the Competency will be pared down. They will now read: The students use various information sources and gather data according to their needs and interests. The other expectations—They adjust their knowledge on the basis of the new information, and use the knowledge in various contexts—will be eliminated.

Of the Key Features of the Competency, one will be revised slightly, but all four key features will be included:

- The student gathers relevant information
- The student organizes information
- The student uses information
- The student evaluates his/her procedure

The new category, Development of the Competency, will apply to all the cross-curricular competencies. It will read:

- At the preschool level
- From Elementary Cycle One through Elementary Cycle Three

The Benchmarks will reproduce many elements of the previous Evaluation Criteria. The table below compares the Benchmarks with the Evaluation Criteria in the previous version of the QEP, for this competency.

• Benchmarks for the competency *To use information*	• Evaluation Criteria for the competency *To use information*
• Consultation of various sources	• Appropriate selection of information
• Appropriate selection of information	• Consultation of various sources
• Coherent organization of information	• Logical organization of information
• Identification of strengths and weaknesses in use of information	• Identification of strengths and weaknesses in use of information
• Use in new contexts	

To work with others
The Expectations Related to the Competency will be simplified. Previously, they were:

- The students make a personal contribution to team efforts.
- Their attitudes encourage interaction and feedback.
- They make a point of helping the group achieve its objectives.
- Teamwork involves learning how to work together and learning by working together.

In the new version, this category will read simply: The students contribute to team efforts.

The Development of the Competency (see above)

There will be four Benchmarks, all of which were previously Evaluation Criteria:
- Participation in planning a task
- Participation in performing a task
- Observance of work procedures
- Suggestions for possible improvements

One former evaluation criterion, Identification of conditions that facilitate or hinder cooperation, will be eliminated.

Other Changes

In addition to these changes in the presentation and structure of each cross-curricular competency, Gagnon noted, certain competencies themselves are being revised. The personal and social competency *To demonstrate a sense of ethics* will be combined with the intellectual competency *To exercise critical judgment*, creating a new competency, *To exercise critical, ethical and aesthetic judgment*. Meanwhile, in order to accentuate the cultural dimension in personal development, the competency *To develop his/her personal identity* is being changed to: *To develop his/her personal and cultural identity*.

Finally, one Area of Lifelong Learning, Social Relationships, is being eliminated from the QEP, as it overlapped too much with the personal and social cross-curricular competencies.

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Clear and Concise

Jalbert gave a brief description of the descriptive scales that will be used in the *Québec Education Program* at the elementary level. "For each cycle, a scale consists of three or four levels of competency (or stages)," she explained. "Each level of competency is accompanied by a general description of what a student can do at that level. This description includes only those elements of the program of study considered significant at this level of development; it is not a list of everything in the program!" To help staff understand how the scales are used, the description of the levels of competency may be accompanied by examples or samples of student work.

An effective descriptive scale illustrates the degree to which a characteristic is present, makes it possible to record the judgment made, is based on a continuum (rather than on a number of unrelated elements), and comprises a number of stages, depending on the targeted results and the level of discrimination possible. "Teachers have to decide, realistically, whether they have enough information to situate students in a given stage," Jalbert warned.

Jalbert identified two pitfalls that teachers must avoid. First, they should not associate the stages in a descriptive scale with the specific times in the academic year: the development of competencies varies greatly from one child to another and from one milieu to another. Also, teachers may be tempted to divide each stage into smaller elements. "This is something they must avoid at all cost; descriptive scales are not designed for this purpose," explained Jalbert. "Each stage must correspond to an important step in the development of the competency; otherwise, one tends to lose sight of the competency."

End-of-cycle expectations are established for each subject-specific competency, but not for the cross-curricular competencies. According to Jalbert, "With respect to the cross-curricular competencies, what is important is to monitor individual students' evolution and, if they are experiencing difficulties, to take measures to help them. We continue developing cross-curricular competencies throughout our lives. Even we ourselves, education specialists, are not necessarily all at the highest stage for each cross-curricular competency."

Teachers can refer to a descriptive scale throughout a cycle, to see where students are in the evolution of their learning. At the end of a cycle, they can refer to it for the students' end-of-cycle progress report. This will enable them to judge, for each competency, whether:
- The student has exceeded the level;
- The student has attained the level;
- The student has attained the level but certain aspects are not consolidated;
- The student has not attained the level.

"This is one example of an end-of-cycle progress report," explained Michel Laurier. "It can be set up differently, depending on what one wants to communicate. One might expect an end-of-cycle progress report to cover all the competencies, but in pratice, that may be difficult to achieve."

The end-of-cycle progress report is transmitted from one cycle to the next, so that each cycle-team is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each student. The report is also transmitted to parents, in whatever form the school decides on.

Working Closely with the Educational Community

Descriptive scales must be written in close cooperation with people working directly in the school, particularly teachers and program developers. "There should be a continuous give and take between the experts and the pratice; that is the only way to construct a viable scale," said Jalbert. The criteria for writing a descriptive scale include conformity with the program, clarity of the descriptions, conciseness and the inclusion only of essential elements.

The elements selected must be easy for teachers to identify, because the scales have to be user-friendly. It is also important that teachers be able to discriminate easily between the levels of competency. "The distinction between the stages should be clear. Otherwise, a student may be placed at any level, and the scale becomes useless," explained Jalbert.

Why Descriptive Scales?

Several factors underlie the use of descriptive scales in the evaluation process in elementary school. First of all, performance standards were developed in response to demands for accountability in most countries. "These standards describe what is expected of students at various points in their education, Laurier explained. In connection with these standards, benchmarks were established to monitor the development of a competency without necessarily requiring that all students have to reach a given benchmark at the same time. Benchmarks are generally used to follow the development of a competency.

In addition, this evaluation method fits in well with the *Québec Education Program*, because the competencies develop over time and to different degrees. "The benchmarks explain the conditions in which the competencies will develop," said Laurier.

Finally, descriptive scales are part of an approach to evaluation that seeks to give a more comprehensive image of the student's development and to illustrate how learning develops. "Of course, sometimes it is still necessary to make a more specific diagnostic," observed Laurier.

Available Soon

Margaret Rioux-Dolan, Director of the Direction de la formation générale des jeunes, told participants in the meeting that the descriptive scales for the Cycle One programs (developed on the basis of the present version of the QEP) will be ready in May. A workshop will be devoted to this subject at the next training session, which will be held in Laval, in May.

At the same time, a support document explaining the concept and use of descriptive scales will be distributed in the schools and school boards. "We want to make it available as soon as possible so that teachers can become familiar with the descriptive scales," said Rioux-Dolan. The scales will be revised later on, to harmonize them with the 2001 version of the *Québec Education Program*.

Margaret Rioux-Dolan, director of the Direction de la formation générale des jeunes, and Laila Valin, the new assistant director of the evaluation, provided updates on three projects currently under way: the consultation process on the Policy on the Evaluation of Learning, the validation of the Guide for the Evaluation of Student Learning, and the evaluation of the reform itself.

By Eve Krakow

Policy on the Evaluation of Learning

Consultation Process

The consultation process on the Policy on the Evaluation of Learning was originally scheduled to end in January. However, in response to demands by the education community, the deadline was extended to March 31. "Caseloads of documents are still coming in!" said Rioux-Dolan.

To date, the Ministère de l'Éducation has received over 1600 questionnaires completed by schools, school boards and private schools, as well as briefs from universities, professional associations, parent representatives, unions and other partners. This represents a response rate of over 50 percent. The MEQ is still waiting for six school boards to submit their reports.

An external firm has been hired to enter and process the data. "We will then analyze the comments so that we can prepare recommendations to the ministerial authorities, make the necessary adjustments and have them validated," said Rioux-Dolan. "We hope to announce the MEQ's position on the evaluation of learning in elementary school by mid-June."

However, the policy as a whole will not be published at that time, as various committees are still working on related issues, such as the evaluation policy for learning at the secondary level and the certification of studies. These committees are also working to produce an implementation plan for the policy, which would contain concrete means for supporting schools.

Preliminary Trends

While stressing that the results of the consultation process are still being compiled, Laila Valin presented some preliminary trends that have emerged. Respondents agreed with certain aspects of the policy, requested that others be clarified or emphasized, and had widely divergent views on others.

Beginning with the points with which respondents agreed, Valin said, "No one seems to challenge the need to draft a new evaluation policy, which is reassuring." Respondents deemed formative evaluation during the learning process to be of fundamental importance, as well as the integration of evaluation into learning. They also strongly supported the notion of trusting teachers' professional judgment. They stressed the need for professional development and support for teachers in order to implement the evaluation policy. And they called on the MEQ to provide tools for implementing the policy.

"However, some believe the policy should stay general and that the tools should be included in supporting documents," Valin noted.

In terms of points requiring additional explanation or emphasis, respondents asked for clarification on the issue of values, particularly those of equity and equality. They also requested that the place of knowledge in learning and in evaluation be clearly established as an essential component in the development of competencies. "This point comes up very frequently."

Respondents wanted it clearly stated that the objective of success for all does not in any way mean lowering standards. They had many questions about the evaluation process, particularly as regards judgment, as well as about report cards. Finally, respondents requested an enrichment of the section on the respect for diversity and differences, by further explaining this notion and making more links with the policy on special education.

Points of Contention

Some aspects of the policy generated diametrically opposite reactions, and will therefore require further discussion and examination. One such aspect is the pertinence of normative interpretation. "Some people want to leave the door open to normative interpretation, while others feel it is in contradiction with the orientations of the reform."

Another issue is whether there should be a single policy for all three sectors (youth, adult and vocational education) or three different policies. Some respondents suggested maintaining one policy but having separate sections for each sector.

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Guide for the Evaluation of Student Learning

Validation Process

In addition to the consultation process on the policy, a validation process has been carried out for the accompanying document, the *Guide for the Evaluation of Student Learning*, to determine whether it meets teachers' needs and expectations.

"In particular, we wanted to validate the clarity of the concepts presented, whether the guide was useful and easy to apply in the field, and whether it contained all the pertinent and essential elements," said Rioux-Dolan.

A total of 144 teachers in the French-language sector and 33 teachers in the English-language sector were surveyed, representing all three cycles of elementary school as well as preschool, and including both generalists and specialists.

Overall, 32% of respondents thought the concepts were clear, 64% thought they were relatively clear, and 4% thought they were not very clear. The number of examples and concrete tools was considered largely insufficient (80%). "Work is currently in progress to add a significant number of examples to the guide," Rioux-Dolan noted.

Most of the teachers surveyed thought the vocabulary used in the document was clear (49%) or relatively clear (49%). "However, we will still be revising and rewriting the document to simplify the vocabulary, while making sure it remains accurate."

Another positive point, said Rioux-Dolan, was that the vast majority of respondents considered the guide very useful (19%) or useful (74%). Only 7% did not find it of much use.

Points to Clarify

"Based on the comments of the teachers surveyed, several aspects in the guide still need to be clarified, while new items need to be added," said Valin.

Respondents felt there was a need to better distinguish between evaluation carried out during and at the end of the cycle. They also wanted more information on how specialists are to carry out evaluation—particularly in terms of cross-curricular competencies—given the large number of students they see.

The role of the school team and the cycle team need to be explained further. "Respondents also requested means for fostering teamwork. How can the cycle team plan evaluation? In some schools the culture of teamwork still needs to be developed."

More information is needed on the cross-curricular competencies, on the passage from one cycle to another and on the issue of students with learning difficulties who are integrated into regular classrooms. Once again, teachers said the role of the report card needs to be clarified.

In terms of new elements, teachers requested two major additions: tables and diagrams, to facilitate the understanding of certain concepts, and more examples, to better illustrate and clarify statements. "Examples were requested for every chapter."

Teachers would also like the MEQ to provide examples of evaluation tools, for both the subject-specific and the cross-curricular competencies. "These might be tools for the teachers, or self-assessment tools for the students." Finally, respondents felt that a glossary would be helpful.

A Basis for Discussion

On the whole, teachers felt the guide was a good reference tool and that it would provide a basis for discussion on evaluation practices. They said it should be distributed to all teachers, but that they will need time to become familiar with it if they are too apply it.

"Teachers identified several needs, for making changes to their evaluation practices," Valin concluded. "They will need evaluation tools, meeting time, training in evaluation and support."

Evaluation of the Reform

Several projects are being set up to evaluate the reform, said Rioux-Dolan. They have two main focuses. The first is to evaluate the impact of the reform on education in the youth sector. One means for doing so is the Cycle One project (described below).

The second focus is to monitor, on an ongoing basis, the progress of the implementation of the reform in schools. "We will do this by developing evaluation tasks for student learning and by collecting information from principals, teachers and students in order to learn about the organizational and pedagogical environment and the learning conditions in which the students are placed."

Cycle One Project

Since January 2000, three departments—the Direction de la recherche et de l'évaluation, the Direction de la sanction des études and the Direction générale de la formation des jeunes—have been working on a project to evaluate the impact of the new curriculum on student learning at the end of Cycle One.

To do this, evaluation tasks will be used. An evaluation task consists of a complex task integrating subject-specific competencies (taken from the language of instruction and mathematics) and at least one cross-curricular competency, Valin explained. The tasks were developed and tested in the fall of 2000.

Questionnaires will also be sent to the school principals, teachers and students of the sample groups. The sample will consist of 150 classroom groups from the French-language sector and 50 from the English-language sector, chosen at random.

The evaluation tasks are planned for November 2001, so as not to interfere with regular student evaluation and so as to gain an accurate portrait of what students have retained. Each task lasts about twelve hours over a two-week period.

School boards and private schools selected for the sample will be contacted in May, and in October, the teachers concerned will receive training for administering the tasks. "We expect to publish the report on this evaluation project in June 2002," said Rioux-Dolan.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF SCHOOLSCAPES, THE NEWSLETTER:

Priority issues in the preschool, elementary and secondary education sector
For an integrated vision of student services: work in progress
Support committee for the implementation of the reform
2000-2001 in retrospect; Outlook for 2001-2002

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